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THE FLYING STAG PLAYS NO. 5

TWO BLIND BEGGARS AND ONE LESS BLIND

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BY PHILIP MOELLER

EGMONT ARENS NEW YORK

THE FLYING STAG PLAYS
For The Little Theatre

No. 5

TWO BLIND BEGGARS AND ONE LESS BLIND

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The Publisher.

TWO BLIND BEGGARS AND ONE LESS BLIND

A Tragic Comedy in One Act by Philip Moeller ◊ ◊ as played by the Washington Square Players

Published by EGMONT ARENS at the *Washington Square Bookshop* o New York
1918

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TWO BLIND BEGGARS AND ONE LESS BLIND

was first produced by the Washington Square Players, at the Bandbox Theatre, New York, 1915, with the following cast:

GREGORY, an old blind beggar	*Edward Goodman*
GEORGE, another blind beggar	*Ralph Roeder*
A THIRD BEGGAR, less blind	*Walter H. Frankl*
A LITTLE GIRL	*Florence Enright*

JUN 24 1918

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no 1

TWO BLIND BEGGARS AND ONE LESS BLIND

The Scene is a rag-pickers' cellar. Five feet above the back of the stage is the level of the sidewalk, where the feet of the people passing can be seen and from which a broken stair leads down. The scene is dimly lit by the light from the street. In a corner is an old stove with a few coals turning to ashes. On a box is an oil lamp. Gregory and George are sorting rags.

GEORGE

Did you hear them?

GREGORY

I've heard nothing but your beery breath coming and going when you lean towards me.

GEORGE

Nothin' else?

GREGORY

What else?

GEORGE

The happy feet of the people going home from the factory.

GREGORY

I've heard your breath, I tell you, and the scrape of your dirty hands in the rags.

GEORGE

Dirty, you say?

GREGORY

You've brought a new stench into the cellar. It's too bad that you've come with your rackety smut to filthy the end of my days. If you must spill your noise whisper it low in your brain. Your talk's too much and your truth's too little.

GEORGE

Ah don't be hard on me. When I'm as old as you, I'll be happy to welcome a friend.

GREGORY

A friend, you say. That's a slippery word. How long is it we've been here together in the damp?

GEORGE

I've lost count of it.

GREGORY

Is it mor'n a week or less'n a week?

GEORGE

It's longer than that. But it's hard knowing with only your ears to tell you the time by the feet of the people passing.

GREGORY

Is it two weeks?

GEORGE

It's mor'n that, for it's every month that they stand in the gutter banging their drums and praising the Lord.

GREGORY

So it's mor'n a month that you've sat there batting my ears with your bawl, and you say you're my friend.

GEORGE

[*Whining.*]

Well, ain't I? Didn't I tell you how it was when I saw?

GREGORY

It was an endless hurt to hear your boasting.

GEORGE

Didn't I tell you about the tree with the moon in its twigs and under the branches the huddled people moaning with love in the dark?

GREGORY

I can forgive you for tellin' me that. It's the sort of thing the blind can see. What's the moon like?

GEORGE

Like the looks of a silver dollar spinnin' round.

GREGORY

I've heard people tell of such things.

[*They go on quietly working. There is a sound of voices passing the door.*]

GEORGE

It's evening—they're going home—their feet are quicker.

GREGORY

Be still now. I've had enough of your talk.

GEORGE

You used to like to hear about the houses . . .

GREGORY

Be still, I tell you!

GEORGE

Of the churches, with the spires like icicles a mile high hanging upside down.

GREGORY

[*Throwing a handful of rags at George.*]

Here, stuff these rags in your head!

[*They go on working. Gregory feels about him.*]

GREGORY

Have we done yet?

GEORGE

No, there's more to be sifted.

[*A coal drops. He lifts his hand, palm up, in the direction of the stove.*]

The coals are turning to ashes.

GREGORY

You talk like a woman that feels the cold.

GEORGE

When I'm as old as you and half of me stiff in the ground, I'll not mind it. But there's a long length of life ahead of me.

GREGORY

God gagg the words in your throat! It's happy I'll be at your funeral kicking the stones till they rattle down on your upturned face.

GEORGE

There's a pool of sweet in your heart, old man, but if ever I die before you, I've still lived the longer, for I've known the light and the looks of things . . . and I once saw a worm lying drunk in the sun.

GREGORY

It's a dark day that I sit and hear you tell of this.

[*They go on working. Gregory again feels about him.*]

GREGORY

We've done now and I can sleep.

GEORGE

It isn't much that you'll see in your dreams.

[*Gregory rolls over on the floor. After a moment George begins to whistle.*]

GREGORY

[*Sitting up.*]

You're sticking needles in my ear! Shut up!

[*He rolls back on the floor. Georges reaches another bundle.*]

GEORGE

Old man, here's another, but we'll leave it till tomorrow.

[*When he lies down Gregory straightens up, as if they were each at either end of a see-saw.*]

GREGORY

I can't take the risk. I might die before morning and I don't want to step up to God with a sop of filthy rags in my hands.

GEORGE

You're so old you're afraid to die.

GREGORY

Afraid, am I? What chance would I have sprinkling the dust under the clean white noses of the angels. Give me the bundle.

GEORGE

Tomorrow.

[*Gregory lurches towards him and catches him by the hair.*]

GREGORY

You've got no religion.

[*His hand comes down to George's throat.*]

GEORGE

[*Trembling.*]

I haven't the heart to dispute with a weak old man like you.

[*He rolls the bundle over. There's a scuffle and scrape on the floor.*]

What's that?

GREGORY

Rats, you fool.

[*Gregory unties the cord. George falls to sleep. When the string is unloosened Gregory stretches out his leg and kicks George in the ribs.*]

GEORGE

[*Starting up.*]

God damn you, old man! My hand was just on the knob of her door. Why did you wake me?

GREGORY

It might be better for me if you slept. . . .

[*George flings himself down again snarling.*]

Because if I find something here it's all my own.

GEORGE

[*Sitting upright.*]

I'll help you sift.

[*They go on working. Gregory chuckling softly to himself.*]

You're a mighty miser keeping all that joy to yourself.

GREGORY

[*Exploding with mirth.*]

Ha! Ha! Ha! That was easy—easier than kissing a corpse. Ha! Ha! Ha!

GEORGE

Eh!

GREGORY

It's twenty years, I've been siftin' and nothing's ever been found. And now at the hint of it you're up from your sleep. Ha! Ha!

GEORGE

There may be somethin'.

GREGORY

[*Fiendishly.*]

Ha! Ha! Hope's a filthy whore, my boy. She pops her head around the corner and when you run for her, up go her fingers to her nose. Ha! Ha! You might just as well have slept.

GEORGE

There wasn't a wink in me. I'm afraid to sleep. If my sight came back while I slept, I mightn't know it.

[*They go on working. Far off a whistle blows.*]

GEORGE

There's a fog on the river. The boats will be moving slowly.

GREGORY

It must be a poor thing to see. You're always got to be going somewheres and looking at people.

GEORGE

I once saw a woman look at me!

[*His hand stops.*]

GREGORY

You've stopped sifting.

GEORGE

It was like the smell of the trees.

GREGORY

This is a big bundle.

GEORGE

It was like the voices of the people in the dark. I heard them—all of them, they were saying, "You! You!"

GREGORY

You didn't hear right. It was "I! I!" they were saying.

GEORGE

All day I kept lookin' into people's hearts.

[*They go on sifting the rubbish. Another coal drops in the stove.*]

GREGORY

They're late to-night.

GEORGE

The little girl will be tired.

GREGORY

He'll be walking the streets led by the child till the last glimpse has gone from his eyes. And then he'll come and sit in the cellar along with us.

GEORGE

He'll remember many things but his words will be bitter with the sight just gone from him.

GREGORY

Soon he'll be sitting here with us and be spittin' about in the dark.

[*They are nearing the end of the bundle. Suddenly their bodies straighten and their arms come up together, a dollar bill in their hands.*]

It's got a stiff feeling . . .

GEORGE

It's somethin' new . . .

GREGORY

It's covered with tiny threads . . .

GEORGE

Like silk . . .

[*Their heads come together.*]

GREGORY

It's got a nice smell . . .

GEORGE

How thin the edge is!

GREGORY

Twenty years I've been waiting . . .

GEORGE

This would be a great moment for my sight to come back.

GREGORY

Do you know what I've got in my hand? It's a thousand dollars.

GEORGE

It's stiffer'n rags.

GREGORY

I can buy lots of soap and be clean when I get to heaven.

GEORGE

Food in the morning and food at noon and food at night and a bed to sleep in . . .

GREGORY

I mayn't die for a long while.

GEORGE

It's a good thing I kept awake and did my duty.

GREGORY

May God turn the lie to flame in your mouth.

GEORGE

Lie is it?

GREGORY

It will hang to your feet on the judgment day, weighing you down when you stretch towards the Lord.

GEORGE

It's mighty familiar your tongue is with God.

GREGORY

[*Attempting to snatch the bill away and shrieking.*]

It's mine! mine! mine!

GEORGE

[*Whispering.*]

You're wrong, you rotten old man, it's mine.

GREGORY

[*Quickly.*]

My hand touched it first.

GEORGE

I felt your hand reach it.

GREGORY

It's mine!

GEORGE

You're like the burnt out end of stick, old man. If I touch you you'll crumble to ashes.

GREGORY

Keep back from me, for I've two teeth left and they're sharp.

GEORGE

What will you do with the money, with the smell of the years on you?

GREGORY

I'll buy, and I'll burn tall candles, and when I awake forever, I'll be nighest the seat of the Mighty, kissing the feet of the Lord.

GEORGE

It's more likely you'll be bending down to polish his boots.

GREGORY

He'll be touching my lids till the gay sight comes into my eyes.

GEORGE

You're wastin' your hope and the money. There isn't a foot of room in the whole white length of heaven for a smutty and rotten old boy like you.

GREGORY

May the God of the sparrows forgive you for his wicked son Cain is born again.

GEORGE

I'll leave you alone in the cellar to sweat and to freeze and to pray and to stink.

[*He clutches the bill.*]

GEORGE

The money is mine for I'll know how to spend it . . .

GREGORY

Let go! let go!

GEORGE

I'll go down where the street girls walk and I'll feel their faces and smell their breath and she that's the sweetest will go with me and all day long I'll be believin' in your God. And this on Monday and this on Tuesday, and on Wednesday—booze and a length of sleep.

[*He attempts to snatch the bill. They struggle.*]

GREGORY

Christ! Mary! Francis! Peter! Paul!

[*And then to George.*]

God damn you!

[*Suddenly they spring at each other's throats. The bill falls from their hands and tumbles back amid the rags. They sway and slip. They are up again and the fight goes on.*]

GEORGE

Your teeth!

GREGORY

Unclose your claws.

[*Choking.*]

I! I!

[*They are now behind the stove and gradually they sink to the floor. They have strangled one another. Then there is silence and another coal drops in the stove. A moment later the Third Beggar and the Little Girl come down into the cellar. They step on the last step and sit down.*]

THE LITTLE GIRL

How does the story end?

THE THIRD BEGGAR

They lived happy ever after.

THE LITTLE GIRL

That was a beautiful story. Will you tell me another tomorrow?

THE THIRD BEGGAR

Yes, while we walk. How much did we get today?

THE LITTLE GIRL

A rich child gave me three pennies. Her dog ran after her with a collar of silver bells around its neck.

THE THIRD BEGGAR

If my eyes only last till the winter comes and then I can go out alone and be playing my flute. In the old days I'd get many pennies that way. It's a fine sound for the rich people, the white sound of my flute, below in the streets when the snow's falling and the lamps are lit.

[*He starts groping about him.*]

Is it dark in the cellar?

THE LITTLE GIRL

There's a coal that's still red in the stove.

THE THIRD BEGGAR

We can warm our fingers.

[*He comes forward and stumbles against the bodies.*]

THE LITTLE GIRL

If I don't lead you, you'll fall. Give me your hand.

THE THIRD BEGGAR

I'm steady now. My foot slipped against one of the bundles.

[*He again comes forward and this time trips over the outstretched legs of the beggars.*]

THE THIRD BEGGAR

What's this?

THE LITTLE GIRL

I'll light the lamp.

THE THIRD BEGGAR

Yes. Here's a match.

[*He searches in his pocket, turning out one and then the other.*]

THE THIRD BEGGAR

I've got none. See if you can find a bit of waste paper on the floor that I can light at the coal.

[*The Little Girl looks among the rags where the beggars have been sifting. She finds the bill.*]

THE LITTLE GIRL

Here's a crumpled piece of paper. Will this do?

[*She brings it to the old man.*]

THE THIRD BEGGAR

I can't see. It's so dark down here.

[*He folds it into a sliver.*]

Yes, this will do. Now lead me to the stove.

[*The Little Girl does so. He lights the paper. In the flicker of light he sees the two dead beggars.*]

THE LITTLE GIRL

I'm afraid!

THE THIRD BEGGAR

Don't talk or you'll wake them. Go home now.

THE LITTLE GIRL

[*At the stairs.*]

You must'nt forget my story tomorrow.

THE THIRD BEGGAR

It will be even finer than today.

[*The Little Girl goes out. The bill is nearly burnt to a cinder. He looks at the bit left in his hand.*]

God forgive me. It was so dark I couldn't see. It's a dollar bill that I've burnt!

[*Then as he leans over the two beggars.*]

It must be a terrible thing to be blind and to die.

CURTAIN

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